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Author(s): Jan Breman

Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 16 (Apr. 17, 1993), pp. 737-741

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4399608>

Accessed: 20-09-2016 07:41 UTC

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Jan Breman

Surat is basically one big transit camp of labour. These footloose proletarians are subject to repression and exploitation in a capitalist framework remarkable for its nakedness and rawness. The orgy of violence which broke out in the second week of December last has to be seen against this backdrop.

SURAT is an old mercantile centre on the west coast of India. Situated at the mouth of the Tapi river the town was already an important international harbour long before the beginning of the colonial era. Both the British and the Dutch East India Company made Surat their entry point when they first came to south Asia. Traces of the early colonial history can still be found, e.g. Valanda Bandar, the site of the Dutch factory now changed into a public garden, and a monumental cemetery where sailors and agents of the Dutch EIC were buried. In the image of colonial literature Europeans dominated during the 17th and 18th centuries but the urban economy and the linkages from Surat with the subcontinental hinterland were firmly controlled by a coalition of Muslim, Hindu and Parsi commercial interests.

The old fame has made way for new glory. After a period of stagnation and decline under late-colonial rule Surat has re-emerged towards the end of the 20th century as one of the major industrial bases in west India. Within a period of barely 25 years the city's population has grown from less than 5,00,000 in 1971 to nearly 17,00,000 inhabitants at the beginning of 1993. The agglomeration has become one big industrial workplace characterised by a highly varied pattern of small-scale enterprises. Not factories and mills but huge numbers of rather austere sheds, workshops and ateliers mark the urban scene. The new economic boom has of late been backed up by the establishment of a vast petrochemical complex situated immediately on the sea front at a distance of 20 km from the city. At night the flames burning against the sky of Hazira can be clearly seen, signalling the new wealth made out of the natural gas found in rich reservoirs on the Bombay High in the Arabian Gulf. The influx of national and international capital together with advanced technology and high-powered management have given rise to a totally new, futuristic landscape. However, the workforce in this modern-industrial enclave is very modest in size, a salariat of not more than a few thousand highly skilled and paid technicians. This labour aristocracy is housed in separate

townships built next to the Hazira work plazas. These campuses are equipped with all facilities: shops, bank and post office, power plant, hospital and sportfields. The houses and clubs are internally differentiated according to work grade and pay-scale but each township is a fortress of comfort and modernity. The orderly life within these neat compounds, fenced off with walls and protected by security guards, contrasts sharply with the uprooted and miserable existence led by the majority of the people dwelling or floating somewhere and somehow in the Surat metropole. The teeming mass to be found here is mainly employed in powerlooms, diamond workshops and other industrial ateliers, most of which employ on average 10 to 50 workers at best. This multitude of small-scale enterprises is not concentrated in well-defined industrial zones but is sprawled around both the inner city and the urban outskirts. The art-silk industry in particular—in addition to the powerlooms also the specialised establishments which prepare the yarn and the dyeing-and-printing mills which produce saris from the woven cloth—dominates the urban economy. Including all ancillary activities—the manufacture of bobbins and beams on which the yarn and cloth are wound, the transport of material in all stages of processing and the very elaborate network of tradesmen and commission agents buying or selling the commodities—the textile industry accounts for nearly half of the city's extraordinarily large workforce. Surat contributes about 60 per cent to the total quantity of art-silk produced in the country. The steady expansion climbing up to this impressive proportion went together with the decline in the market share of much older centres of production, Bombay and Ahmedabad in the first place. Most textile mills in these prime cities of west India dating back to colonial times have been closed and dismantled in the recent past, forcing a large part of the industrial proletariat to move out of the formal sector and find a more precarious niche in the informal sector of the urban economy. It would be misleading, however, to speak of de-industrialisation. The powerlooms

earlier standing in renowned Bombay and Ahmedabad mills were taken out during the 70s and 80s only to be re-installed in Surat, bought up in small numbers—four, eight, 10 or 20 at most—by the owners of petty workshops.

The rise of Surat as a focal point of informal sector activity is a direct consequence of the crisis in the formal sector economy. The shift in dynamics has been condoned and facilitated by the government of Gujarat which promised subsidies, tax holidays, 'easy' labour laws and other bonuses to out-of-state capital in particular. The result, however, is that the public policy-makers lost whatever control they had over the industrial climate. As a matter of fact, Surat has led the way in the wave of liberalisation now sweeping through the country, enthusiastically endorsed and promoted by the World Bank. And, it cannot be denied, with enormous success as far as the growth in the value and volume of production is concerned. Of the total money circulation in Surat 60 per cent is 'kalu' or 'number be', going around in the black circuit. 'Informal' capital is abundantly available and its owners do not mind spending it casually and conspicuously. From 'lakhpathis' many of them have become 'crorepathis' more or less overnight. Imitating the leisurely life-style of the mercantile lords in the feudal past who used to live in palaces, the capitalist class of *nouveaux riches* has built, posh bungalows and skyscrapers. Still, these quarters of the haves and haves-more are tiny enclaves in the landscape of industrial premises intermixed with slums.

Public facilities and conveniences have lagged behind the explosive population growth. The roads remain unpaved in the new neighbourhoods, all surface water is thoroughly polluted, plants and trees are nowhere to be seen, power failure is the order of the day and night, sanitation and drainage are in a dismal state and, consequently, malaria has come back to the urban milieu with a vengeance. Even a longer list of deficient utilities would fall short of conveying the overwhelming impression of filth, ugliness and decrepitude that meets the eye of the newcomer on leaving the railway station in the centre. Surat is said to be the dirtiest city of its size in the whole country, a claim which is not difficult to accept. Nevertheless, the municipal authorities boast that real estate prices are nearly as high as in Bombay, hardly less expensive than in the most prosperous parts of the world.

Travelling from the centre to the periphery the vapour and stench increase. On my wanderings through the slums of Katargam, Limbayat, Udhana and Pandesara my eyes never fail to fill with tears and my nose does not stop running. The skin gets grimy and

sticky with soot and acid. Hearing is afflicted as well, because the industrial heart-beat of this metropole is felt nowhere louder than in the slums. From the jerry-built sheds a deafening noise erupts, the ceaseless humming of the powerlooms and in addition to that the piercing shrill of the crimping machines which even at a distance produce vibrations debilitating to healthy ears. Adjacent to these workshops are the labourers' hutments and dormitories owned and given out on rent by slumlords. The work-sites and sleeping places are not far apart, sometimes even coincide. The textile workforce is split in two shifts that alternate with each other every 12 hours. The capitalist regime of Surat is an industrial jungle, a wild East theatre with labour instead of Red Indians in the role of victims.

In order to understand the work and life pattern of the lumpen proletariat in this big cesspool I have to add here that it is made up of migrants. Most of them do not come from the immediate hinterland of the city but hail from places at far greater distance: Saurashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. Moreover, to this mobilised army mainly young males between 15 and 25 years of age have been recruited. Those who are married have usually left home without their family. A distinct feature of urban Surat is the gender distortion in the demographic profile. The balance has become more uneven over the past few decades and is in some of the most congested localities as low as 500-600 women per 1,000 men. In the streets and workshops the dominated sex is noticeable for its relative absence. A third feature of this footloose proletariat is its casualised mode of employment. Only a small minority of the total working population enjoys the benefits of a permanent job and protected conditions of work as apply to the formal sector economy. Most migrants are temporary and underpaid hands, constantly rotating along the enterprises in their sector of employment. These men are hired and fired according to the needs of their industrial bosses until they are worn out. Wages are paid on the basis of piece-rate and once productivity falls, because of age or bad health, the worker is rejected and driven back to the place of origin.

It is in this economic and social setting of Surat that I want to highlight the orgy of violence which broke out in the second week of December 1992. What took place was a veritable pogrom of which the Muslims living in the city became the exclusive target. What triggered off the hunt on members of this community was the siege for many months climaxed in the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, thousands of kilometres away, on December 6, 1992 by squads of Hindu zealots. Opinions differ on how the pogrom actually started. According to some observers Muslims, inflamed by the pictures shown on BBC television again and again of the final

assault on the mosque, took to the streets in some neighbourhoods to protest against the demolition of this historical monument and to express their displeasure about the passivity of the state which chose to remain completely inactive. On the other hand, statements made by escaped Muslims show that the initiative firmly rested with supporters of the fascist Bharatiya Janata Party. On receiving the news of events in Ayodhya their rank and file congregated and demonstrated at various places in a spontaneous celebration of the outcome of the battle that had waged for months between masjid and mandir. Eye-witnesses told of how already early in the morning on the day after Ayodhya gangs assembled in their localities to attack houses and other establishments which were known to be inhabited or owned by Muslims.

While some testimonies speak of *ad hoc* and arbitrarily formed gangs, other informants are pertinent that the man-hunt which then started was planned and controlled. Evidence to corroborate this interpretation is not difficult to come by. From tractors and trucks directions were given by loudspeaker which street or ward numbers belonged to 'Mussulman'. Along with petrol, iron rods and bars, sticks, choppers and long knives were distributed to the mob to break open the buildings and brutalise the inhabitants. I spoke to a man in Udhna who had managed to hide himself in a latrine from which he could escape only 20 hours later. Through a hole in the wall he had seen how adults and children were beaten and kicked to death. The hunters forced their catch to shout 'Jai Shri Ram'. "I can't hear you. Louder, say it louder. . .". "Oh, merciful Allah, Jai Shri Ram". And then came the last kick, final cut or was the body, soaked with petrol, set alight. Why the additional mental agony? In order to inflict also that pain on the 'sinner' or as an act of pardon, to provide a last opportunity to the victims to atone and convert back to the true faith? In a refugee camp which I visited a small boy, hardly six years of age, sits all alone in a corner staring in front of him. Before his eyes he has seen first his father and mother murdered by the mob, then his grandfather and grandmother and in the end three of his brothers. He is still alive but bodily not unscathed with 16 stitches in his head and burns on his back. The men who did it thought he was dead when they had finished with him. Like his youngest brother, a baby of six months, who is also badly injured. Page after page of my diary is filled with this sort of atrocities. Women between seven and 70 were up for grabs by male gangs roaming around the localities. A young bride is hospitalised, with third-degree burns and shocked out of her senses. After having been gang-raped in front of her husband she was made to look on while her husband was beaten to death and then 'torched'. People were also thrown into the flames and roasted alive. A high-ranking of-

ficial told me how he had seen furniture coming down over the balcony from the opposite multi-storied apartment building: mattresses, chairs, and then to his horror small children as well. Groups of youngsters checked the identity of Muslim 'suspects', that is men growing a beard or dressed in a particular fashion. Trousers down and one glance sufficed to hack the man to death. With pants down your knees there is no way to escape. 'Innocents' were killed as well. A Hindu girl of 18 years who had the misfortune to wear a 'salvar-kameez', a dress which is associated with that of her Muslim peers. And a Hindu man who had been circumcised as a young boy for reasons of hygiene.

There are indisputable reports that the pogrom was pre-planned and also monitored while it went on. What was initially written up as a spontaneous explosion, a frenzied mob rage, has turned out to be incited and provoked by a hard core of religious fanatics. These were the elements from among the majority which targeted 'the enemy in our midst'—in Surat hardly 9 per cent of the population. First-hand observers confirmed that BJP cadre collected information about Muslim families with promises of renewing ration cards. Telephone calls were received by people in different parts of the city suggesting that Muslims prepared for action and that, aided and abetted by enemy forces which were being rushed to Surat, an explosion of attacks on Hindus was due any moment. From at least one temple the call came to destroy the Muslims. Families of communities which had been living for centuries in the city all of a sudden found themselves demonised and exorcised. To kill members of the minority indiscriminately and to set fire to their houses was not enough. They had to be smoked out, trampled down and torn apart like vermin.

The official death toll of this cleaning operation stood at 185, more than half of the total score in the state of Gujarat, when I left the city in the middle of January 1993. The real number of casualties during the December riots was, however, already then estimated by less biased sources to be much higher than that. The body count taken by government agencies was for all intents and purposes meant to be a minimal one, limited to the dead people which the hospitals and police stations were willing to accept and register. Unrecorded remained the bodies of those who were torched and cut to pieces and then thrown down the drain, in the river, buried under a dung-heap or just 'disappeared' in any other way. To conclude that the police apparatus has miserably failed in its public duty does not do justice to the manifold sins of omission and commission that induced the strong arm of the state to define Muslims as a category outside the public arena, outlaws whose life and property was a free for all. Victims who managed to reach a police-post begged in vain for help to rescue their family members who were at that moment being attacked. They

were sent away with the simple message that no men were available or could be spared for that purpose. A man who came to make a statement about the gang rape of his sister was told that his complaint could not be written down because it had happened three days ago. Why had he not come on the day that it happened? His protest that the locality had been sealed off by the mob was brushed aside. The non-performance of the police during the worst hours of the crisis is the consequence of both the communalisation as well as the criminalisation of the corps from top to bottom. In addition to the fact that the BJP enjoys a high degree of popularity in this branch of the government personnel of all ranks seems to be more interested in making money out of their public function than in the maintenance of law and order. Both officers and constables are known to work in collusion with, rather than in opposition to, their underworld counterparts: smugglers, bootleggers, slumlords, gamblers, dealers in female and male flesh and other goonda parasites. Nowhere in Gujarat a sub-inspector has to pay as high an amount (Rs 3 to 5 lakh) for his appointment as in Surat. This 'donation' to superiors and politicians is an investment which will flow back into his pockets in the form of kick-backs, tip and hush money already within one year. What he collects in hafta afterwards is for the duration of his posting, pure profit.

While blaming the police for dereliction of civic duty, one should not forget that the other side of that dirty story is the total corruption of the wheelers-and-dealers in political power at both the municipal and state level, those who belong to the Congress Party and Janata Dal in the first place. Quite rightly Harish Khare could argue in retrospect: "The overall picture that emerged in Surat in the last decade was one of total legal lawlessness. The state and its agencies commanded neither respect nor induced any fear. In public perception the Indian state in Surat was denuded of its legitimacy. Therefore, when the crunch came after the Ayodhya denouement, the state did not inspire any awe."²

In the second week of December the state as the guardian of the public domain had gone off duty. The city space was taken over by 'the free interplay of social forces', turning the streets into a veritable jungle of hunters and their helpless prey. Now, more than a month later, the word spread that the law and order forces were out in great strength and that the government was in complete control again. But was that so? Even towards the end of January there were nearly daily reports about new incidents in Surat: sporadic cases of stabbings, hutments set ablaze and curfew reinstalled in 'affected' areas. However, what looks like a low-level continuation of the December riots may from a different perspective very well be downgraded as a back-to-business as usual, i.e., a return to a more 'normal' state of violence.

The social identity of the hunted and trapped is known. Of those who got killed 95 per cent were Muslims.³ But who were the ones going out on a looting, raping, arsonist and/or killing spree? There cannot be the slightest doubt whatsoever that most of the hunters came from among the horde of labour migrants who have flocked to Surat. The victims, the next of kin of those who did not survive, and other eyewitnesses are unanimous in naming the 'kathiawadi' diamond cutters, the UP 'bhaiyas' and the Oriya 'malis' operating the powerlooms as the main culprits. As if to confess their guilty implication in the pillage and massacre an exodus took place in the days immediately after the pogrom. On a single day 85,000 tickets were sold at the counters of the Surat railway station, an absolute record, and extra trains had to be brought in to ease the pressure on the overflowing platforms to a somewhat manageable level. Reliable estimates are difficult to come by, but altogether more than two lakh labour migrants are reported to have fled to their home towns and villages far away in order to distance themselves from the scene of pillage and massacre.

I find it intriguing that members of this underclass, until yesterday so convincingly portrayed as the victims of the criminalised economic regime that reigns the city, have become without further qualification singled out as the ones 'who did it'. By a mere sleight of hand they were transformed from sufferers into sinners, the ones who if not initiated the urban carnage than at least perpetrated the bestialities to which members of the Muslim minority fell prone in such large numbers. It seems that any other explanation than just to refer to the brutal lumpen behaviour of an alien mass not rooted in the polished 'surthi' tradition is considered to be superfluous. In my opinion, however, one should look back on the December pogrom from a slightly different angle.

In the first place it is not a coincidence that many victims who escaped with their lives, as well as eyewitnesses and other insiders, spoke in their statements emphatically of the bachelors among the migrants who committed the atrocities. This motley collection of young males earns its pay under miserable conditions far away from home and detached from family life. Accommodated in densely packed tenements and sheds during their off-hours, they lead a beastly existence in *jhoopadpattis*, such a gay name for their overcrowded and filthy slum habitat scattered in numerous pockets all over the city. The gangs working on the day shift go to sleep in 'beds' still warm from the bodies of their mates whose turn it is to operate the powerlooms for the duration of the night shift. Part of the same domestic order is that the teams which rotate are supposed to prepare each other's food. My current research on labour in the informal sector of south Gujarat, which was the reason for my stay in Surat in the wake of the riots,

has shown that violence of all shades and gradations is the order of the day in this agglomeration's underbelly. It is a macho milieu dominated by drunkenness, gambling, fights, etc. These are all practices of aggression in which the powerful seek out and discriminate the weak and vulnerable. Such an age and gender-distorted atmosphere reduces not only women to targets of rape, often repeatedly so, but explains why also young boys are frequently subjected to acts of sodomy at the initiative of somewhat elder men.

In the second week of December last year this horrendous and persistent but hidden violence at the bottom of the urban heap erupted. The explosion resulted in a flow of volcanic vomit making its way in the outside world, spilling over into terrains populated by social classes which pretended to be totally unaware of the lurking danger until then or which, minimally, considered themselves to be well-protected against the underground monster. But contrary to the outburst of a volcano, which throws the fire burning subterraneously together with the debris with greater destructive power outside in directions unforeseen, the massive eruption which shook Surat last December was a man-made blast instead of a natural calamity which is essentially both unpredictable and uncontrollable. Although presented in fundamentalist quarters as a willful act of god, the pogrom was premeditated by political interests (hailing from those same quarters) and directed towards a minority accused of sacrilege. Those who joined the hunt were signalled that no harm would come to them as long as they managed to keep their identity anonymous in the guise of 'the mob', the Lumpen.

According to one perverse tale, which received wide national coverage, the molestation of women was not only done in public but also put on video-tapes as a souvenir to be savoured by the actors for their repeat pleasure later on. Other sources suggest that these shots were taken to add to the torture and humiliation of the bereaved Muslim families. I am glad to report that my frantic efforts to substantiate this abomination by hard evidence have remained unsuccessful.

The news, as far as I have been able to trace it back, was filed from Surat and appeared first in *Gujarat Mitr* on 19 December 1992. *Indian Express* wrote on the same day that video cameras zoomed in while women were made to strip and then raped. Less than a month later *India Today* supplied this sordid piece of information as a recorded fact in its national issue published in English. The Gujarati edition was more precise than that. 'These cassettes were openly circulated among the public. The police were not able to get hold of them, however, and therefore believes that no such cassettes exist!'⁴

Numerous informants belonging to the majority whom I met in the first half of January insisted that their friend, brother, cousin, neighbour or companion at work had told them of the video but no one claim-

ed to have seen it with his own eyes. This made me feel rather suspicious about the veracity of the rumour. On following up I found that a new porno cassette had reached the Surat market at the end of November adding to an already highly varied and widely available supply. For a couple of hundred rupees this commodity finds a ready demand particularly among the diamond cutters. The ateliers which employ these young kathiawadis are regular sweat-shops which get transformed into sultry night dens once the work day is over. Boys will be boys, especially when living alone but in close male company, and all chip in to enjoy in their leisure time the dirty pictures of the other sex. As one who became invited a couple of times to such voyeurist group sessions I can only speculate on the phantasies of these alien workers living in an alienated world. As was brought to my notice by one of these connoisseurs a new video clip had come to the streets in the beginning of December. This one was a sado-porno cassette imported from the west and copied in large numbers locally. It shows the rape of a blond and white (also that) young girl who in the end gets cruelly killed in the act. To the best of my knowledge this fiction became transcended into 'real' fact during and by the communal orgy held in Surat a couple of weeks later.

In the second place, it would be wrong to attribute all atrocities indiscriminately to 'the scum' inhabiting the city slums. Actually the sizeable part of the informal-sector's workforce which ran away did so not because of a guilty conscience. The mass stampede of migrants arose out of sheer fright. These footloose proletarians often could not comprehend what was going around them and had good reasons to feel threatened by a course of events totally beyond their control. Some of these outsiders were mistaken for 'the enemy' and bore the brunt of the attack in their locality. Oral testimonies recorded in interviews with migrant workers clearly radiate a sense of bewilderment and certainly not deceitful complicity, let alone collusion with the conspirers of the pogrom.⁵

Several victims of loot and arson have talked of how they were rescued by Hindu friends, neighbours. Even complete strangers went out of their way to provide a safe haven for Muslim individuals or even whole families while the riots went on unhampered day and night. But next to these stories of heroism or, at least, plain civic solidarity, there are also reports of criminal acts committed by bourgeois elements against members of the minority. An additional reason why the December riots shook Surat so badly was that the pogrom did not remain restricted to the slum localities. Some of the posh localities came under attack as well and not from without but from within. Friends of mine living in areas populated by the more well-to-do told me how they had seen boys of next-door's neighbours going out to

ransack and then burn down Muslim shops in the neighbourhood. Such was the passion into which Hindus irrespective of their class background seem to have flown, that a wholesale attack on the religious outlaws came to be justified as a cleansing operation necessary to liberate the locality from the polluting presence of this breed. The wives of doctors, lawyers and chartered accountants spread the news to each other about where shoes were 'freely available' and mothers dispatched their sons to go and come back with saris of a particular design or colour. Sometimes parents and children joined in these shopping raids, stacking the loot in the family car. In such cases the vulgarity of the lumpen bourgeoisie reached its lowest point.

A semblance of normalcy had been restored when I arrived in Surat in the beginning of January. However, army and police continued to patrol the streets and curfew had not been lifted in the city's centre and in areas said to be prone to communal strife. I still could visit some of the 39 refugee camps that had been set up but most of these closed down only a few days later. Much too soon and due to the pressure exercised by the municipal authorities who anxiously wanted to create the impression that Surat was trouble-free again.

Although the violence has abated, many Muslim inhabitants who took refuge with relatives in villages at some distance deemed it wiser not to return immediately to Surat. Those who stayed on hope that the nightmares through which they lived are over. That remains to be seen. The atmosphere in the city is still sultry and the central government has signalled to the lower state organs that new outbursts should not be excluded. To be on the safe side shopkeepers have written with chalk on the shutters of their establishments: *a Hindunu dukan che* (this is a Hindu shop). Makar Sakranti, a major festival in Surat in the middle of January, was celebrated this year on a low key. Many Muslim manufacturers of the kites experienced a boycott by their regular customers belonging to the main community. Scattered incidents continue to make victims nearly each and every day even at the end of January. Two men were killed by home-made bombs recently. These crude but deadly missiles are thrown from the back-seat of a scooter or from a motor rickshaw into a prayer-house or are brought to explosion in congested places such as open air markets. These attempts at retaliation carried out by Muslim youngsters provoke their sparring partners on the other side of the fence in taking counter-revenge in an never-ending cycle of stray violence. A typical press report, filed from Surat late January, reads as follows.

About 300 hutments at Utkalnagar, near the Katargam GIDC estate, were set ablaze this evening. No casualty was reported. Meanwhile, the army staged a flag march in the Rander and Athwa areas today. Seven fire

fighters and ten water tankers rushed to the spot and battled for nearly three hours to bring the blaze under control. People ran for their lives as the flames engulfed the hutments and reduced them to ashes. Meanwhile, an indefinite curfew was imposed on Rander as the situation became tense in the area following two stabbings. An official of the Surat Telecom was done to death. Another official of the state prohibition and excise department received serious injuries. He has been admitted to Lokhart hospital. The police also had to fire four rounds to disperse an armed mob near Taj society near Rander and Mora Bhagal late last night. About three people have been arrested in connection with yesterday's stabbing incidents. About four columns of the army arrived in Surat on Sunday and are in a 'stand to' position at the diamond complex in the Sachin GIDC estate, about 12 kms south of Surat. Curfew was relaxed in the Athwa police station area for seven hours this morning from 5 am to 12 noon. No untoward incident was reported today. The Additional Commissioner of Police.

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Mr K Nityanandam was today transferred from here to Ahmedabad. Mr Sudhir Sinha will replace Mr Nityanandam. Security has been beefed up in the entire city in view of the Republic day celebrations tomorrow. The police on Sunday also filed a complaint against a Congress corporator from Rander, Mr Iqbal Wasim Malick on the charge of creating terror in the area on Friday.⁶

The die-hard militancy of the organised Hindu backlash has prepared the ground for the December massacre in Surat. In a successful attempt to cry down her male companions in venomous aggression Sadhvi Rithambhara, a high-placed female BJP leader, publicly licensed her co-believers to go out and 'do it to them'. "They (note: the enemy has a pseudo-identity anyway and is carefully anonymised) did not heed our words. Now the time has come for beating and kicking them. "If there has to be a bloodshed, let it happen once and for all!" And so it happened in Surat, but once and for all? That, unfortunately, is not the impression which I got.

Pathfinders of the Hindutva wave aroused and manipulated the religious sentiments of the majority said to have kept silent until now. From that corner came the political forces which declared the hunting season on Muslims to be open. It did not take much effort to activate the lumpen and encourage this rabble to join or even spearhead the righteous rally against India's new untouchables. Now that the evil spirit is out of the bottle it is very difficult to bring it back under control again. What I find alarming is that feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment about what took place during the days of the pogrom are quite rare. In retrospect the killing of Muslims seems to be vindicated by suggesting that this was a proper punishment for a minority which had stepped out of line. The massacre can thus be explained as a ritual of purification made necessary in order to pacify divine worth. I have found support for this interpretation in various factual accounts. In an early write-up *India Today* reported:

In spite of such horrible violence, there is no feeling of shame or sadness in anyone. The communal elements among the Hindus consisting of many traders and professionals believe that this was going to happen. One businessman said, 'Muslims will never dare to raise their heads in Surat now. They will have to learn to live in an inferior position as befits a minority'.⁷

The indifference with which neighbours in several cases reacted to the horrible plight of people living next door, whom they had known since many years, is an illustration of the same moral turpitude. Engineer has argued that the December riots in Surat were in a way the logical outcome of communalised politics initiated by the BJP. Sympathisers of this party did not mind spreading the ruthless message that Muslim women deserved to be raped for what men of their stock had done to female Hindus many generations ago. To this Engineer rightly

adds that the cruelties which occurred cannot be attributed to the state of emotional excitement. The justification of violence even after the event shows, according to him, the extent of communalisation among the people and the degree of hostility engendered.⁸

To the extent that the dominant Hindu sections within the bourgeoisie of Surat now recoil from the terror unleashed, they do so first and for all propelled by self-interest. The city's industrialists are worried not out of concern for the Muslim victims but because of the economic havoc it created, an enormous set-back to the city's reputation as a flashpoint of industrial growth and prosperity. The leaders of business life hold the state responsible for bringing the fugitive hordes of labour migrants back to the yoke from which they bolted. Belying the proverbial sluggishness of the state action in the face of crisis, a high-ranking official was sent from Ahmedabad within days of the start of the pogrom to Surat in order to make contingency plans how to keep the production going. In the company of several textile barons Gujarat's ministers of industries and of labour toured Orissa already a few weeks later. The objective of their goodwill mission was to persuade the stream of refugees to come back with the solemn pledge of both government and employers that no more harm would come to them. The migrants did not have much of a bargaining position but they still tried to strike a better deal than before. I find it quite significant that their list of demands included an end to police atrocities on Oriya workers, estimated to contribute not less than 1.5 lakh to the huge army employed in the textile industry.⁹

In the debate now going on in secular quarters there is the tendency to explain the urban carnage in west India in terms of arguments which focus on the primitiveness of religious communalism. On the one hand there are the 'mullahs' and 'maulvis' who have for decades held the Muslims spell-bound with their fundamentalist directives. Those who belong to the major community, not so silent anymore if they have ever been that, seem to get ready for joining the banner of militant Hinduism. Seen from this light the antagonistic field of force that was built up over a long period made the final explosion inevitable. I am afraid, however, that the discharge of pent-up rage was not meant to be final, a once and for all. The thesis of a communalist confrontation is certainly a plausible one, but it falls short of explaining why this particular hurricane hit Surat so strongly. To my understanding the city became fertile soil for such a disaster because the political climate has accepted no restrictions to the informalisation of the rapidly expanding economy.

Surat is basically one big transit camp of labour coming in and going off again. The place is swamped with a floating mass which remains outside the law and beyond the benign reach of state agencies. These

footloose proletarians are subject to repression and exploitation in a capitalist framework remarkable for its nakedness and rawness. We have here a reserve army of labour moving around in an economic jungle; a predominantly male force of aliens with no or meagre skills, which is casualised and forever kept on the run and worn out in a ruthless work regime after not so many years. The bureaucratic chief of Gujarat's labour inspectorate told me that state politicians cultivating and harvesting in Surat constantly bothered him with requests for licenses, exemptions from regulations and supersession from taxation, but that not a single one of them had ever questioned him on the non-implementation of minimal wages or of other labour laws that exist on paper for migrant workers. In accordance with management practices characteristic of informal sector employment the migrants are disoriented from their identity on arrival in the city and throughout their stay continue to remain deprived of the minimally required stability that makes a social system worthwhile to belong to. The transients are reduced to a passing labour commodity in a cycle of attraction and rejection, condemned to a life which is inhuman by any definition. For the flourishing condition of her informalised economy, so praised by the overseas lords of the global syndicate with its headquarters in Washington, the late-20th century version of the former East India and other foreign Companies, Surat has paid a high price in recent months. Too high to the taste of businessmen and policy-makers in the region? I am afraid not because, next to the Muslims, it has been mainly the poor, only marginally given access to the urban arena, who are asked to foot the largest part of the bill.

Notes

- 1 Engineer, Asghar Ali, 'Bastion of Communal Amity Crumbles' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 13, 1993, p 263.
- 2 Khare, Harish, 'The Surat Explosion: Wages of Lumpen Capitalism' in *The Times of India*, Delhi, January 12, 1993.
- 3 Engineer, p 264. *India Today* in its English edition of January 15, 1993 gave a somewhat lower figure of 'over 80' per cent of the deaths' (p 75).
- 4 Menon, Ramesh, 'It is Just the Beginning of Tragedy' in *India Today*, Gujarat edition, January 15, 1993. The summary article in the English edition by the same author is more equivocal: '... some deaths video-filmed, a perverse tangent to Surat's well-ingrained wealth', p 75.
- 5 See in particular Lobo, Lancy and Paul d'Souza, 'Images of Violence: Surat Riots-II' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 30, 1993, 152-54.
- 6 *The Times of India*, Ahmedabad edition, January 26, 1993.
- 7 Menon in *India Today*, Gujarat edition, oc.
- 8 Engineer, p 264.
- 9 *The Times of India*, Ahmedabad edition, January 29, 1993 and February 10, 1993.